

Archives as Empowering Resource Centres for Communities The Digital Community Archives of the National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai¹

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Abstract: This article is reproduced from *Mapping Cultural Diversity—Good Practices from Around the Globe* published by the German Commission for UNESCO and the Asia-Europe Foundation in November 2010. The publication is a project of the U40-program “Cultural Diversity 2030”. The electronic version of the publication is available for download from <http://www.unesco.de>. Based on the DCA projects of National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai, this paper explores Digital community Archive initiatives as suitable models for preserving intangible heritages.

Introduction

Traditional knowledge has been emphasised as a “source of intangible and material wealth” and a “positive contributor” to sustainable development in the UNESCO Convention. The Digital Community Archives project in India serves as a good illustration of a civil society-led initiative that has responded innovatively to the challenges of protecting and promoting the cultural expressions of indigenous people, while also harnessing its potential for local development. By documenting, compiling and categorising traditional knowledge through participatory ways, these folklore archives are empowering communities to take ownership of their cultural resources and build sustainable futures.

India lives in its villages, and beyond. In remote rural communities across the length and breadth of the country live thousands of indigenous communities, both tribal and non-tribal, each with its own distinctive culture. Against the backdrop of India's rapid modernisation, the need to protect, preserve and promote the knowledge systems and cultural expressions of these communities is pressing.

Innovatively responding to this very challenge are six Digital Community Archives (DCA) in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkand states. These innovative community archives have successfully shattered the stereotype of the folklore archives as the "dusty preserves of scholars, eccentrics and governments".² Instead, these dynamic resource centres have emerged as "community spaces" with possibilities to "influence social histories of communities, aid self-reflexivity and propel economic development."³

The DCAs are a project of the National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC), a non-governmental, non-profit organisation based in Chennai and dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications since 1997. Each archive is established by NFSC in collaboration with local organisations after extensive consultation with the community to be documented. Documentation generally takes the form of video and audio recordings as well as still photographs. The archival materials become the raw materials for publications and documentary films enjoyed first by the community and then by the public.

Principles of the DCA Model

Drawing from the experience of establishing and managing the DCAs, Dr. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, Director, NFSC has laid out key principles and practices for community folklore archives.⁴

The community is central to the project and participate in the documentation as "fair and equal partners". To this end, the choice of materials to be documented is arrived at through "community consensus". Multiple versions—including contradictory voices—are recorded. Further, the capacity of the communities is strengthened through visual literacy workshops in order to effectively engage them as recorders of their culture.

The language and structure of the archives also reflect the community and its worldview. Language documentation is integral to the process of creating an archive of cultural resources. Digital records are described in the native languages of the communities. Importantly, the systems of categorisation and the relations in the 'relational database' of the archives "need to follow the sensorial and everyday experiences of the insiders".

The process of building an archive includes the interpretation of the documented material by the documented community. Repeated projection of documented materials to the communities is the chief method employed for the same. "Stray and other meta folklore emerging out of the responses" is further documented. "Intimate conversations carried over a fairly long period", rather than structured questionnaire, are the preferred method for collecting responses.

The DCA views the communities themselves as the "primary audience" of the archived material. The documented materials are first collected together as "community resources" before they are "circulated back to the communities". All methods of categorising and labelling (e.g. editing a video or describing a photo) involve the community. Methods of dissemination of the collected material also engage the community as ambassadors of their own culture.

With regard to the dissemination of the archived materials through media channels, the primary focus rests on "carving out a cultural space for the communities".

Examples of the application of the above-mentioned principles are evident in the various DCAs.

The Community as Fair and Equal Partners

The archive in Villupuram district in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu focuses on the *Narikuravars*, a community of traditional nomads that continues to face social marginalisation. The *Narikuravar* community have been more than mere subjects of documentation at this DCA. They have engaged actively in the digital documentation process as recorders and potential communicators of their own visual production. Young adults from the community continue to be regularly trained in theatre and audiovisual documentation. Participation has been further strengthened with two *Narikuravars* joining the DCA as staff members. The process of handing over the archives to the communities is also underway.

Beyond the goal of ethnographic documentation of cultures, the archives remain responsive to the immediate concerns of communities. At the *Jenukuruba* archive in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, a second objective is to organise the displaced Jenukuruba tribe, a forest people, by creating awareness of their legal rights over the land and other natural resources. In January 2010, a Forest Rights Committee was formed in the village.

The Community as Primary Audience

The DCAs view the documented communities as the primary audience of the archival materials produced. Hence, the archival process includes

the act of interpretation of the collected material by the community in question. In Tamil Nadu, for example, *Vaagri Material Culture*, one of the resource books produced through the DCA, has been taken to 38 other *Narikuravar* settlements across the state by NFSC field officers to elicit the community's responses to the documentation and to strengthen networks within the community. This "process of returning the publication to the community as a repository of their culture"⁵ is a significant aspect of the approach by the DCAs with regard to the final ownership of the knowledge systems documented.

In Jenukuruba, the archival materials have been translated into two documentaries, *Jenukuruba* and *Learning from Jenukuruba*. These films have generated "moments of introspection"⁶ within the community by evoking memories of life in the forest. Such introspection "could signal a retrieval of lost cultural practices".⁷ As with the *Narikuravars*, the documentation has been acting as a catalyst aiding self-reflexivity in the communities.

Intimate Conversations as a Means of Documentation

Another DCA located in the drought-prone Nuapada district of India's south-eastern state, Orissa has been documenting the cultures of the the *Gond* tribes and *Bhunjias*, a non-tribal people. Agriculture is central to the life of communities here. The resulting rituals and practices form a wealth of knowledge that has been carefully documented in the archive. As part of the documentation, interactive sessions on agricultural practices and forest production were held with the *Gond* and *Bhunjia* people respectively. Such intimate dialogic processes are favoured by the DCA as methods of data collection over questionnaires and interviews.

Carving Cultural Spaces for Communities

Public dissemination of the archived materials is undertaken with the goal of creating or reclaiming cultural spaces for the documented communities. The tangible outputs created by the DCA on the *Narikuravar* community have not only been valuable in integrating this fragmented nomadic community, but also in educating the public about the richness of the oft-misunderstood *Narikuravar* culture, which is particularly known for its vast knowledge of wild herbs and medicinal plants.

The work of another DCA in Jharkhand, one of India's newest states, assumes significance as its focus rests on the documentation of a specific dance form rather than a community. Documenting the increasingly internationally-recognised *Seraikella Chhau* has become important as it "on the verge of becoming one more classical dance form of India" but which has in reality been shaped by numerous indigenous communities over decades. Unearthing the story of the development of this dance form and documenting its characteristic features—namely, the

footwork and the mask making—will enable public discussions on the socio-cultural associations and misperceptions around the dance form.

Connecting the archive with the local education and media has served to broaden the reach of the documented materials and enable wider discussions on the documented communities. Preliminary discussions are presently underway between the Jenukuruba archive and a local school on the possibility of a folklore course using the archived material. Such a course would serve as an entry point into the study of local ecology, often conspicuous by its absence in the formal curriculum used in Indian schools. The archive in Jharkand already functions as a dynamic resource centre for *Chhau* students.

Integrating Culture in Sustainable Development

The archives are addressing the important issues of livelihoods in and sustainable development of indigenous communities through the DCA project. The archive focusing on the River Nila in Kerala and the cultures along its banks are a case in point. The archive here is seeking to document the life, art and rituals of the riverside communities and, in the process, to also unearth the intricate web of connections between culture, ecology, performance and ethnography. At the same time, the DCA along with their local collaborators have set up an Eco-Bazaar to sell locally-made organic products through exhibitions and fairs. The proceeds from the sales reach the artists directly.



Members of the Bhunjia tribe at worship in Orissa

A Good Practice for the Convention

The protection and promotion of the cultures of indigenous peoples is a growing challenge across the world. As India modernises and urbanises, many indigenous cultures are being threatened with gradual extinction. The UNESCO Convention plays a valuable role in addressing this challenge by encouraging Parties to create an enabling environment for indigenous people (both as individuals and as a social group) to “create, produce, disseminate, distribute and have access to their own cultural expression” (Article 7—*Measures to promote cultural expressions*). In particular where such cultures and cultural expressions are “at risk of extinction, under serious threat, or otherwise in need of urgent safeguarding” (Article 8—*Measures to protect cultural expressions*). Further, the Convention emphasises the need to integrate culture in sustainable development (Article 13). The DCA project serves as a good illustration of a civil society-led initiative that has responded innovatively to the provisions in Articles 7, 8 and 13. In doing so, the initiative draws attention to the “fundamental role of civil society in protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions” as laid out in Article 11—*Participation of civil society*.

Traditional knowledge has been emphasised as a “source of intangible and material wealth” in the Convention. In particular, “knowledge systems of indigenous peoples” have been acknowledged as a “positive contribution to sustainable development”. The DCA project is a good example of an initiative that responds to this urgent need in the context of India’s culturally-diverse indigenous peoples. By documenting, compiling and categorising traditional knowledge through participatory ways, the folklore archives are empowering communities to take ownership of their cultural resources and their sustainable futures. The potential for replication in other countries with diverse indigenous population is immense.

More information: www.indianfolklore.org

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Notes

¹ This profile of the DCAs draws from the following documents kindly provided by NFSC: NFSC Annual Report and Report of NFSC Board's Evaluation of Narikuravar / Vaagri Community Archive Project (compiled by Aakaash Nair, Shanthini Sarah and Vani Venugopal).

² Dr. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, *Going Beyond Database Utopia: Principles and Practices for Community Folklore Archives*, www.indianfolklore.org/nfscblog/nfsc-diary/going-beyond-database-utopias-principles-and-practices-for-community-folklore-archives/ Accessed 03 November 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. This section of the profile is entirely based on the text by Dr. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy.

⁵ National Folklore Support Centre. NFSC Annual Report. Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre, 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

References

Nair Aakaash, Sarah Shanthini and Venugopal Vani, 2010. NFSC Annual Report, Chennai : National Folklore Support Centre

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